

After the Bell, Beyond

Why limit learning to a 45-minute time slot? Technology now enables students to learn where and when they want.

Eric Langhorst

Where does learning take place for your students? Does it begin and end in your classroom? Or do you use technology to extend your students' learning beyond the classroom walls?

Technology has enabled me to do just that. In my 8th grade American history class in Liberty, Missouri, my students now read books and blog about them with people who live in different states, interact online with authors and panels of experts, and study for tests where and when they want by listening to information downloaded to their MP3 players.

Our world is increasingly about having media—music, video games, phone calls, or streaming video—at our convenience anywhere and anytime. New kinds of media and technology are also changing the face of education. Colleges are offering increasing numbers of courses online to fit students' busy schedules. The convenience of this flexible learning environment is gaining traction at the K–12 level as well. Last year, Michigan passed a bill that requires all graduating seniors in the state to complete at least one online class. Missouri has embarked on an ambitious program to offer virtual courses to K–12 students who would benefit from online, as opposed to traditional, classes.

Teachers can use the same tools that make online courses successful to expand learning opportunities in the classroom. Today, anyone can publish text, audio, images, or video on the Web quickly and at no charge using blogs, wikis, podcasts, and video-sharing sites like YouTube. Students use these social networking tools and applications to visit with one another, entertain themselves, and view media of their choice. Why not use these tools to deliver content to students and assess their understanding?

Test Review with StudyCasts

I experimented with podcasting during summer 2005, creating a collaborative podcast titled "Speaking of History." Fellow history teachers and I described projects we were doing in class and suggested lesson plan ideas. However, I wanted to find a way to use podcasting that would have a more direct effect on my students.

Using Audacity, a free audio-editing program that works with Macs or PCs, I recorded myself discussing major concepts that students needed to know for an upcoming unit test. These test reviews, which I call StudyCasts, are 15–20 minutes long. After recording the review, I upload the MP3

file to the Internet and place a link on our class Web site. Students can then access the StudyCast wherever they have Internet access, or they can download it to an MP3 player, such as an iPod. I also make the StudyCast available at no charge through iTunes for students who use the Apple music store. Students who don't have Internet access at home can request a CD of the StudyCast, which they can play in a standard CD player.

StudyCast started as a novelty but has now grown into an important part of the review practice for many of my students. At school conferences, parents have commented favorably on the StudyCasts. Some have mentioned that they listened to the audio reviews with their students, which enabled them to take a more active role in their child's study routine. One parent asked me to show other teachers in the school how to create their own StudyCasts. Students said they listened to test reviews while walking the dog, doing chores around the house, or as they were riding in the car. I realized how essential the StudyCasts had become when, one night before a test, students and parents e-mailed me about an error in the URL that I had provided. They asked me to fix it as soon as possible so they

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while walking the dog
or doing chores
around the house.**



the Walls

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could use the StudyCast to review for the test. In an end-of-the-year survey, 85 percent of my students expressed the hope that other teachers will start recording their own StudyCasts.

The special education teachers have found that the StudyCasts benefit students with reading disabilities. Students can repeat portions of the recorded review or listen to the entire session as many times as they wish. StudyCasts also help the special education teachers use their time more efficiently in the resource room. A student can listen to the StudyCast for an upcoming test, freeing up the teacher to work one-on-one with other students who need specialized help.

The same technology can help special needs students during assessments. Teachers can use a recorded version of the written test to help students who require that their test be read aloud—a common modification that typically

requires much of a special education teacher's time during assessment. Students can replay the test as often as needed, enabling special education teachers to work with other students.

The StudyCast has also generated global interest. A man from Spain e-mailed me to say that he had listened to the StudyCast for my test on the American Revolutionary War. He noted that although I had described the role the French had played in helping the colonies gain independence from England, I had not adequately described the contributions of the Spanish. He gave me the name of a book that describes Spain's role in the American colonies' struggle for freedom. Since his e-mail, I have made an effort to describe both the French and Spanish contributions.

The Virtual Book Club

My fellow history teachers and I wanted our roughly 300 students to read and

discuss a historical novel about our local area at the start of the American Civil War—*Guerrilla Season* by Pat Hughes. Of course, finding a time and place for 300 students to discuss and share their thoughts about a book is physically impossible. So I decided to launch a virtual book club, which I created using Blogger, a free Weblog publishing tool. Students can access the blog from anywhere they have Internet access—school, home, the library, and so on. We wanted to include as many people as possible; with the blog as the meeting place, anyone could join.

Pat Hughes, the author of the book, joined the discussion at our invitation. We also welcomed an 8th grade language arts class from California, a college professor in Louisiana, and an audience of viewers that eventually numbered in the thousands from all over the world. Over the course of four weeks, I posted several different discus-

sion questions on the blog. For the sake of online safety, students used pen names when submitting posts, and as moderator, I approved all comments before posting them. We added images, podcast interviews with the author, and external links relating to the novel. Toward the end of the project, the blog became an online showcase for student work pertaining to the novel; we included movie posters that students created based on the book and audio interviews with characters.

Student reaction was incredible. One student read the book with her father; together they posted questions to the author. Another student read the book with her grandmother, who lives in a different state. This project became more

In a short survey at the end of the project, an overwhelming majority of students (93 percent) said that having the author of the book involved in the discussion was important to the project's success.

Because creating a blog using Blogger is free, the only cost associated with the project was the cost of the books. Moreover, the project is easy to replicate. During spring 2006, we created a book blog using *The Year of the Hangman* by Gary Blackwood; in January 2007, a teacher in Florida whose class was reading the same novel used our blog as a template for his own. Many of my students participated in the Florida class's discussion.


Could we have read *Guerrilla Season*

Technology didn't kill the book; it gave it more life and enabled it to grow beyond individual experience.

At Their Own Pace

Technology also enabled the book project to reach a new audience—students with reading disabilities. At the start of the project, as I described the general plot of the book and the number of pages that students needed to read each week, I could tell that some of my students—the struggling readers—were ambivalent about the project. They thought it would be fun but difficult for them to participate in because the pace of the reading would overwhelm them.

A special education teacher in our building, Lance Huebner, took it on



The goal in raising one's child is to enable him, first, to discover who he wants to be, and then to become a person who can be satisfied with himself and his way of life.

— Bruno Bettelheim

than just reading a historical novel—it became an experience that more than 300 students shared with both the author and the community. When is the last time the president of your school board joined in on a reading assignment with an 8th grade class?

One week, the discussion on the blog focused on the similarities between the guerilla warfare tactics used in Missouri during the Civil War and the current war in Iraq. In other posts, students asked Pat about how she had researched the book; in her response, she explained how she used the Internet for research and for finding details relevant to the story and confirming their accuracy. Details like these, she noted, contribute to making a historical novel believable. She even described an incident in which she almost made a mistake. She had included a description of prairie dogs in Missouri—but then learned that they were not native to that area. She caught and corrected the error just before the book went to press.

as a class project and discussed it in a traditional manner? Sure, but discussing issues in an open forum and receiving immediate feedback from the author made this a more dynamic learning experience. Traditionally, reading a book is a linear process. The author writes the book and, at a later time, the reader experiences it individually. However, the book blog provided a different, richer experience: Reading the book became a two-way street in which inquiry was possible for both reader and author.

Does this mean the end of the traditional book? Will audiobooks on iPods and Internet-driven text make books extinct? Our book blog project is a perfect example of how the two formats can complement each other. My students still curled up on the couch and read *Guerrilla Season*; some students brought the book with them to lunch to read a couple of pages between bites. However, later on they could go to the blog and join in lively discussions with other students, adults, and the author herself.

himself to create a solution. During his evenings at home, Lance read *Guerrilla Season* aloud and recorded the narration with a portable MP3 player. We received permission from the author to use the audio files only to help the students with reading disabilities as they followed along with the text. Students listened to Lance's narration and kept pace with the reading. The audio component empowered the students, enabling them to fully participate with their peers in a reading project—an unprecedented experience for them. The students also chose an audio format for their final project. They recorded mock interviews with one of the book's characters, turning in their final project as an MP3 audio file.

Experts in the Classroom

Access to experts in specific fields has never been easier for teachers and students. During our study of the Oregon Trail, I showed students a PBS documentary on the Donner Party, the

famous wagon train that became lost in the Sierra Nevada Mountains during the winter of 1863, largely because the members of the group followed the advice of Lansford Hastings, who promised a shortcut. The tragedy of the Donner Party never fails to capture the imagination of my 8th graders. It includes poor decision making on the part of the wagon train's leaders and stories of cannibalism as people struggled through the winter to survive.

One hotly debated issue concerns who was responsible for the tragedy and whether the Donner Party should have trusted Hastings. Before we watch the video, I divide the students into two groups. One group documents evidence in the film that proves that Hastings was responsible for the fate of the wagon train; the second group records evidence that proves that he wasn't responsible. In past years, this debate was the extent of our discussion.

But this year I did something different. I checked the credits at the end of the documentary for the names of the history consultants involved in the production. I also researched authors and experts on the Donner Party over the Internet. I sent e-mails to several of these individuals describing my class's interest in the topic and explaining how the students were debating the responsibility of Lansford Hastings in the matter. I asked whether they would be willing to listen to a short debate, e-mailed to them as an MP3 file, and then judge the merits of each side's position, adding their own personal reflections. Within 48 hours, three Donner Party experts contacted me to say that they were willing to take part in our project.

Each group of students had two minutes to share their evidence and one minute for a rebuttal. The experts' feedback was invaluable. They delivered a detailed commentary on the recorded debate, pointing out additional information that the documentary had not included. They emphasized the role of the weather in the tragedy and showed

that the situation was quite complex, resulting from a combination of several factors. The experts also acknowledged the high caliber of the debate, which was highly rewarding for students.

Promoting Flexible Learning

Will technology magically save the U.S. education system? Certainly not, but to effectively teach all students, we clearly must begin to use some of the technology that has so dramatically changed our lives outside the classroom.

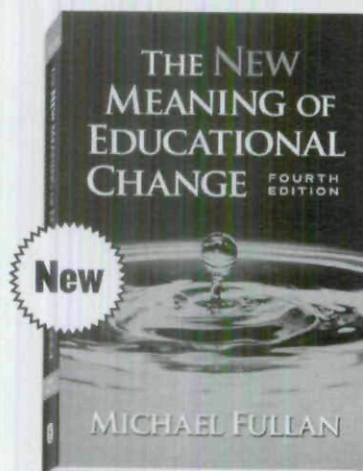
It's not about the "wow" factor—it's about effective instruction. Students bring multiple learning styles to school; not everyone is best served through lecture-based content delivery and assessments based on written text. Blogs and podcasts can more flexibly meet the needs of individual students both in and out of school. Delivery and discussion of content can take place in the form of a blog entry a student makes at 8:30 p.m. on a weekday evening. Or a student may decide to investigate a topic that we discussed in class—at 7:10 a.m. in the computer lab before homeroom.

I would encourage teachers to discuss with their students how to make content more accessible through technologies that students regularly use. Why not deliver content using iPods and MP3 players? Or a teacher could create a short video that explains a concept on a test and post it on YouTube for students to view at home. We teachers can be positive role models and show students how to use such networks productively.

The brick-and-mortar school, along with teachers, should be the core for learning. But we cheat our students if we continue to think of school as a class period that begins and ends with a bell. **EL**

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POWERFUL and TIMELY

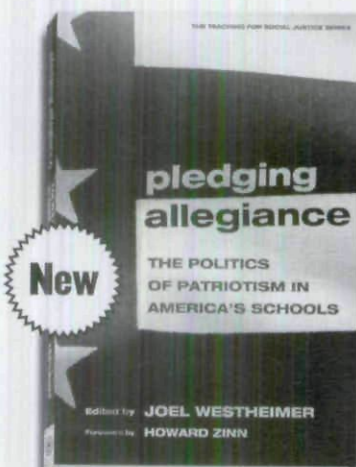


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